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ABSTRACT

A four-stage feminist research project investigating European Social Fund (ESF)-funded vocational training for unemployed women used the grounded theory approach. Stage 1 involved the formation of the research questions and design. Steps included the ontological, epistemological, and methodological positioning of the researcher. Stage 2 was the case study with the "workers" of an ESF-funded training program in Britain (United Kingdom). A process of inductive coding was used for the analysis of the transcripts of loosely structured interviews. Two categories for considering the achievements of the training project were generated--immediate or future aims and intentions of each group involved. In stage 3, a search of legislative and policy documents was conducted. A benefit of the grounded theory approach was that it directed the research toward analysis of secondary data. Stage 4 was analysis of the labor markets. Again, a benefit of the approach was the way in which the research was directed outwards. Labor market data were analyzed historically, occupationally, and hierarchically to understand the position of women within the labor market and the relevance of the training to past, present, and projected labor market trends. At this stage in grounded theory, it was necessary to consider the entire research process by going back to the data, looking again at the emergent categories from each stage, and identifying the dominant relationship that emerged. The dominant relationship was the discourse of equal opportunities. (YLB)

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The use of grounded theory within 'feminist' research.

Introduction.

I do not intend, in this paper, to dwell on the original grounded theory work of Glaser and Strauss, or to discuss in detail the theoretical arguments for and against grounded theory in particular, or inductive research in general. But rather I intend to show, through a recent research project, how grounded theory can be a useful methodological approach in 'social justice' research. There are two main reasons why this is so. The first is that these areas of research are essentially 'under-researched'. This can make it difficult or limiting for the researcher to impose a hypothesis upon it. The second is that grounded theory can take as its starting point the actual experiences and understandings of the researched group. This means that any concepts or theories that develop from the research are rooted, grounded, in the researched group, rather than in the originating notions or assumptions of the researcher. I clarify and expand on both these points in this account of one particular 'feminist' research project, following a grounded theory approach.

The research project: *ESF funded training for unemployed women: policy aims and implementation*, was, as the title suggests, focused on European funded vocational training for unemployed women, primarily through the European Social Fund (ESF), (Brine 1993). I divide my paper, like the research, into four stages:

1. The stage up to the formation of the original research questions and the research design.
2. The case study with the 'workers' of an ESF funded training scheme for women.
3. The search of ESF (and UK) legislative and policy documents.
4. The analysis of (quantitative) secondary data: EU and UK labour market statistical information and predictive reports.

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Stage 1: The stage up to the formation of the original research questions and the research design.

This stage shows the process of the research, particularly in the early formative steps, to be organic, a little messy and full of choices.

The first step in this stage is ontological: the ontological positioning of myself as researcher. This refers to the assumptions I make about the nature of reality that are pertinent to this piece of research. These assumptions of reality, rooted in my own experience and understanding of the world, come from 3 sources. The first are those given by birth: I am white, a woman, and born into a working-class family. The second are those taken by choice: I define myself as a feminist and as a socialist. The third, which are more difficult to pinpoint, are those which result from life events: such as ill-health, work and day to day experiences such as gender or race oppression, poverty, etc. Important to my work now, in this respect, is the combination of early school failure (11+) and my subsequent return to education in my late twenties.

This disclosure of certain personal subjectivities show that I do not enter the research as an objective dispassionate observer of phenomenon. On the other hand I have, as in common practice, selected which subjectivities to disclose and which not. The point often made in much feminist research - to notice the silence and the gaps in the text - is therefore equally applicable to this text.

Linked to this ontological positioning is my original desire to carry out the research. This wish came from my own experience as the co-ordinator of a European funded training project for women. I worked on this training project scheme for 5 years, and I became interested in the element of choice provided, or not provided, by the training opportunities made available to the unemployed - particularly to the working-class black and white women targeted by the ESF and Local Authority funders. As I started the research I wanted to find out what sort of training these women would want - if given the opportunity to choose for themselves, and with the same levels of support, financial, emotional, and educational, as they already getting on the existing schemes.

At this stage, I was also interested in the 'educational' achievements gained by these women. This linked in with my previous research into the comparison of working-class women's low school achievements and their later, more successful, experience on training programmes.

This brief description shows how the ontological positioning of myself as researcher affected the initial focus of the research. It also determined two other aspects of my overall theoretical positioning: the epistemological and the methodological. My epistemological position is that of socialist-feminism, and as one's methodological position is often a logical extension of the epistemological position, so that too is socialist-feminist. This socialist-feminist methodology refers to the broad theoretical framework within which my research took place and not to any one particular method of research. It guided my choice of research methods and the theoretical concepts used in the analysis and interpretation. It also influenced the relationship I took to the researched, and to the use and presentation of the results.

I began reading. One area of reading centred on my experience within the field of women's education and training. I re-read my previous research and the notes made from my training project which included trainee evaluations, tutor reports, course evaluations as well as the annual report made to the Local Authority and the European Social Fund. These documents overwhelmingly pointed to the importance of the role of the 'workers'. By 'workers' I mean the women employed by the Local Authority to work on the training project - either as co-ordinator, out-reach worker, or instructor. The indication was that the 'workers' played a pivotal role in implementing the project, in designing and delivering the actual training. I grew particularly interested in the role played by them in the educational process, especially in relation to notions of radical adult education. I wondered about a possible link between radical educational intentions and an individual worker's own political identity and purpose.

This represented a key shift in the early stages of the research. The focus had changed from the *trainees* to the *'workers'*. The intention of the research now was to consider the radical educational role played by the 'workers' in the design and running of the training scheme.

I was now ready to pilot my research method: loosely structured interviews. The pilot showed the method to be useful, with only slight amendment to the interview schedule. One such amendment referred to the differences of class, race and sexual preference which existed between the 'workers'.

It was at this stage that I formulated the actual research question, which was:

> What were the workers' perceptions of the intentions and results of the training scheme for themselves, the funders and the trainees?

The decision to take a grounded theory approach was not part of the research design at this stage, although from the very beginning the approach of the research was *inductive* - I was trying to develop theory from data. It was not deductive - I did not have a hypothesis that I intended to test against the data. But I did have an idea of where I thought the research would go, in that I had the idea that the dynamic, the focus of interest, would be between the workers and the local funding body - the local authority. This turned out not to be so.

Stage 2: Case study with the 'workers' of an ESF funded training scheme.

My epistemological and methodological location within socialist-feminism determined, within the confines of the research question, the specific research methods used. As I have already said, I chose loosely structured interviews as my research method. I wanted to take the experience of the women 'workers' as the starting point for the research.

The interview schedule, based on knowledge and experience of the field, covered four main areas:

1. What did the 'worker' want to achieve,
   and what did she think had been achieved ?
2. How did the 'worker' perceive the funders' intentions,
   and what did she think the funders achieved ?
3. How did the 'worker' perceive the trainees' hopes,
   and what did she think they achieved ?
4. Questions relating to the 'differences' between all the women involved in the training project ('workers' and trainees).

During the same period as I was conducting and transcribing the interviews I came across Glaser & Strauss's concept of grounded theory, (1967). This

seemed to fit well with the inductive approach I had already taken, and it offered strong possibilities of allowing the research findings themselves to determine the direction of the research - to go with it and see what came out of it.

Following the general inductive approach to the research I used a process of inductive coding for the analysis of the transcripts. The codes used were:

1. research method.
2. the 'workers'.
3. the funders' intentions.
4. the needs of the trainees.
5. the workers within the funding structure.
6. management.
7. the 'issues': differences of 'race', 'class' and sexual preference.
8. achievements.
9. the 'dream'.

The findings from this analysis brought me to a very important point, best described as representing a cross-roads or roundabout within the research process. There were many avenues down which the research could proceed. For instance, the case study itself could have been replicated within this country; a comparison could have been carried out by a case study in another European Member State; there was also the originally anticipated turning leading to a closer analysis of the role of the Local Authority; there was another that could have focused on the management style. Then there were the trainees themselves, and the research could, as originally intended, have concentrated on them. Finally, there was the road that led to a deeper consideration of the 'issues': the divisions which cut across the assumed commonality of gender. Out of simple interest I knowingly took a detour down this road.

But, as Glaser and Strauss point out, within grounded theory, the stress is on the "emerging categories and the *relationship between them.*" (Glaser 1978: 284) The inductive analysis of the case study generated two clear categories for considering the achievements of the training project. The aims and intentions of each of the three groups of people involved: the workers, the trainees, and the funders, were identifiable either as *immediate* - to be achieved during the training, or *future* - to be achieved as a result of the training. It appeared, from the workers' perceptions, that the project adequately met these *immediate* aims. The *future* aim was that at the end of the course the trainees would gain training related

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employment. This *future* aim was seen to be fully shared by funders, workers and trainees. However, the clear indication from the workers was that the project did not actually achieve this. The questions directing the next stage of the research emerge from this second category: the *future* aims of training related employment.

In relation to this, a key point made by 'workers' was their suspicion of the funders' true intentions and their anger over the Local Authority's misuse of the huge 'empowering' potential within such an 'equal opportunities' project. This emergent category led, despite the pointers towards all the other interesting and valid avenues for pursuing the research, to the dominant emergent question from this second stage:

> Why did the funders fund this particular sort of training to these particular women, and why not something else?

This emergent question could also be expressed as a tentative hypothesis:

> The funders' explicitly stated aim that the intention of the training was to increase employment, was of secondary importance to their primary, and less explicit, aim of constructing a *visible* equal opportunities policy.

I had, as I have said, anticipated a focus on the role of the Local Authority, not the ESF. In their use of the term 'funders' the 'workers' meant, almost exclusively, the Local Authority, not the ESF. In fact the ESF itself was rarely mentioned in the interviews. The focus on the ESF was determined solely by the dominant emergent question and this question was one of funding *policy*, rather than interpretation. This meant the ESF rather than the LA. The LA responded to ESF policy they did not themselves make it. Unknown at this stage was the LA's degree of choice in accessing the ESF funds. I thought the research would now focus briefly on current ESF policy and then return to what I still believed would be the dynamic - the Local Authority and their relationship with the 'workers'. This turned out to be the second major shift in the development of the research: away from the LA and onto the ESF.

Within grounded theory, tentative hypotheses are not a structure or a tool for a deductive or positivist approach to the research. They are *generated* from the analysis of the preceding data. They simply express the focal concerns of the next stage of the research.

Stage 3: The search of ESF (& UK) legislative and policy documents.
A benefit of using the grounded theory approach in this research project was that it directed the research in this particular direction, away from replication of the case study and towards the analysis of secondary data. It is a direct response to the "core of the emerging theory" as described by Glaser and Strauss, (1967: 40).

This and the following stage both represent slightly different aspects of the use of secondary data. This refocus of the research highlights a particular feature of both grounded theory and feminist methodology: both refer to the research *approach* and not to any one particular method as such.

This third stage concentrates on the legislative and interpretative documents of the European Commission and the various departments and sub-bodies within it. It also uses similar documentation produced by the British government, especially that of official reports, committee papers and Department of Employment publications.

The research into ESF and UK documents allowed me to identify changes in vocational training policy, firstly, historically, and secondly, through the process of interpretation, within the European Commission, and during its passage through the British government, particularly the Department of Employment. I also read numerous EU and UK vocational training reports and evaluations.

The data showed clearly the strength of ESF policy in determining training provision. It also showed the increasing importance of national Member State governments in the process of interpretation of policy. It became clear that the dynamic of this research was not between the workers and the Local Authority. The dynamic was located in the construct of a European Union: firstly between the 'social' and the 'economic' - that is between the needs of the labour market and the 'problem' of unemployment, now expressed within the concept of 'social exclusion'. This dynamic can be seen for instance in the construct of a 'flexible' European labour force which shows that the EU concern can appear 'social' but is nevertheless determined by the needs of the economy. A 'flexible labour force' is one of the stated policy intentions of the ESF and is within the same overall framework as that of 'lifelong learning'. The aim is towards a labour force, undifferentiated by gender or race, which is flexible in basic employable skills and

easily adaptable to work-place hierarchies and routines; a mobile labour force and one that adapts quickly and without fuss to technological changes. This labour force 'flexibility' is cloaked in a language of 'equal opportunities' - especially in relation to women. It is quite different from 'flexible' as used by Beechey (1977) in her concept of the 'reserve army' of women's labour. This first dynamic is overlaid by another, that between the European Union and the individual Member State and is generated by the shifting social and economic areas of convergence and conflict of interest.

The dominant emergent question from this stage was:

> How do these policy intentions and interpretations relate to the needs and trends of the labour market?

As in the previous stage, this emergent question can also be expressed as a tentative hypothesis:

> The funders' exclusive gender-based interpretation of their equal opportunities policies tend to promote training directed more towards access to 'male' occupations, and less towards the needs of, and therefore employability within, the labour market.

Stage 4: The EU and UK labour markets.

Without exception, during the period of research from the 1987 to 1992, ESF documents stressed that the aim of the vocational training policy was 'training related employment'. Training would therefore reflect the needs and trends of the labour market. Successful employment related training would train women in skills and occupations of growth. This fourth stage addressed this emergent category of relationship between training and the labour market. It concentrates on understanding the position of women within the British and European labour markets.

This 'labour market' analysis relies totally on the research findings of data collected by others - often government funded surveys such as the Labour Force Surveys, and the Employment in Europe series. This earlier research was not concerned with addressing the same issues as those generated in this particular research project, and therefore the specific data needed now was not easily locatable or straightforwardly usable, especially for comparison - either historically or inter-Member State. Very often to gain the required information it was

necessary to compile a table from the data spread out within one extremely large table, or from data scattered across several tables within one publication.

As in the previous stage, a benefit of the grounded theory approach was the way in which the research was directed outwards, allowing a much broader analysis than was possible at the case study stage. This labour market data was analysed historically, occupationally and hierarchically, to understand the position of women within the labour market and the relevance of the training towards past, present and projected labour market trends.

My analysis of this fourth, 'labour market' stage, was essentially statistical: the data itself being, apart from the odd report, exclusively quantitative. But my intention was not to produce yet further statistical analysis of the labour market, but to *interpret* the existing statistical information.

I found, from this stage of the research, that ESF policy intentions do not relate very well with the needs and trends of the labour market. In fact, there appears a considerable mismatch between the training provision and the needs of the labour market. This finding led me to question the validity of the stated ESF intention of training related to labour market needs. The findings seemed to indicate the reverse: that such a relationship is not important. These women did not meet the needs of the labour market, and the specific skill training they received did nothing to improve their chances. All the indications and predictions were that long term unemployed, technologically illiterate, working-class women with previous low educational attainment were not wanted by the labour market, now or in the foreseeable future. If this were so, then what exactly was, or is, the purpose of the training.

I had reached the stage in grounded theory where it is necessary to consider the entire research process, going back to the data and looking again at the emergent categories or concepts from each stage, and identifying the *dominant relationship* which emerges between them. The identification of the dominant relationship is a crucial step in the development of theory. In this research project the emergent dominant relationship was the discourse of equal opportunities. The identification of this emergent relationship led to a reassessment of the theory of equal

opportunities. Such an outcome was not predicted or anticipated at the start of the research.

Conclusion.

I have shown, through this 'feminist' research project that grounded theory can, in certain circumstances, be a useful methodological approach. Grounded theory is not simply descriptive. It is a systematic approach to inductive research. Essentially it means asking questions and letting the emergent dominant categories from the systematic analysis of the responses direct the next stage of the research. These dominant categories are the concepts that form the basis of the subsequent theoretical development. The concepts or categories emerge from the systematic analysis of the data, they are not imposed upon it. All movement, and analysis must be directly linked to and subsequently recheckable against the data. Grounded theory is not then a collection of descriptions of separate research stages: it is a *process* of research that has at its core the pursuit of the *connections* between the stages. In my own research project this emergent connection or relationship was the discourse of equal opportunities.

I have four concluding points to make. The first is that I consider grounded theory to be a particularly useful approach when researching into previously under-researched areas where it is difficult to formulate a hypothesis. On the other hand grounded theory might not be the most suitable approach for a subsequent piece of research developing out of it. A deductive approach, for instance, might then be more suitable if there is some insight or hypothesis that can be considered. The second point is that grounded theory can be a useful approach when there are several researchers or research teams who can not initially agree on a more specific method or research design - particularly when involved in a previously under-researched area. A grounded theory approach requires first an agreed broad question framework. The emerging data then determines the subsequent direction of the research. This relates directly to my third point which is that grounded theory allows the research to move from the ground, from the researched. Not in a conscious way, but as I have shown in this paper, from the categories or concepts that emerge from the systematic analysis of the data. This is particularly useful in 'feminist' and other aspects of 'social justice' research because they remain generally under-researched, and because it allows the

generation of the theory to be grounded in the actual experience and understandings of the researched group. The final fourth point is that grounded theory makes it possible for the researcher to identify the relationships that emerge from the categories that might otherwise never be considered, or perhaps dismissed as less important than they might be. For example I never anticipated that my research would take me into a theoretical critique of equal opportunities.

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